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ABSTRACT

Ground rules need to be recognized in order to make the contributions of public relations volunteers successful. Before beginning, public relations volunteers needs to know what the organization expects of them. Volunteers also should: identify the resources available to them; define and identify the tasks that apply to the specific situation; establish and attain goals; define an evaluation for success; prepare a crisis plan; make sure they know what is happening within the office; establish and maintain credibility; and know who the media people are. Volunteers in a non-profit organization may work alone and should investigate local colleges for an intern who might be willing and eager to learn on-the-job skills for college credits. Volunteers may feel overworked and unrewarded, but their contributions are invaluable and essential to every group that welcomes their contribution. (RS)

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PUBLIC RELATIONS:
A GUIDE FOR VOLUNTEERS

Presented
AMERICAN NATIONAL
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WORKSHOP

PUBLIC RELATIONS: A GUIDE FOR VOLUNTEERS

S. L. Harrison

All will applaud your noble enterprise and, it is written, God will be grateful for your volunteer work. Now that your rewards are disposed of, you should recognize the ground-rules that apply in order to make your contribution as a public relations volunteer successful. These are briefly described.

As a public relations volunteer begin with a clear idea of what that activity entails. One succinct definition put forth by the Public Relations Society of America states that public relations--(a) "helps an organization and its publics adapt mutually to each other" and that it is (b) "an organization's efforts to win the cooperation of groups of people."

More specifically, the authors Wilcox, Ault and Agee in their leading textbook, Public Relations: Strategies and Tactics

(Harper and Row, 1989), characterize public relations with ten key words:

"Deliberate...Planned...Performance... Public Interest...Two-Way Communications ...Management Function."

Planning is a vital ingredient in this mix and every operation must begin with a firm foundation based on sound planning. Every able carpenter works from established blueprints. A solid plan is your blueprint for every function. Most public relations functions include both line and staff operations. As an advisor and counselor to management, you will be asked, and perhaps expected, to establish policies and goals. At the staff level, public relations people are expected to employ a panoply of communication techniques--from press releases to special events, community outreach and other activities. In many instances you will be the behind-the-scenes organizer; in other instances you may be the visible presence, the symbol of authority who represents the organization to the public and the media. Public relations is a key

function: vital, critical, crucial.
Therefore, every volunteer must bear in
mind some essential elements.

Define Your Role

Before beginning, know what your organization expects of you. Ascertain what the goals are. You should ask--and, indeed, have a responsibility to do so--what do we do? Surprisingly, many organizations lack a clear answer. These may be broad and vague, hence, meaningless in the practical application of your specific job.

Your first and fundamental task, therefore, is to clearly identify the public relations goals within your particular group in your specific community. If proposed goals are fuzzy or absent, you may be invited to provide them. If so, define these in clear, concise and concrete language. If you are fortunate enough to be provided with specific goals and plan of action, well and good. But ask first. Find out what is expected of you. Communicate your concerns and your commitment.

Efforts to communicate will surely yield an early awareness of how the communication flow functions within your organization. In some few instances, directives come from the top down to underlings. This is how the military works and in organizations similarly structured, people do what they are told to do. Early on, acquaint yourself with the kind of world you are in. In the best of all possible worlds, information and options for action flow in both directions; especially from the lower levels to the upper echelons. Volunteers, with the best of intentions and enthusiastic energy are likely to be uninformed. Determine as soon as possible what information is available. This process takes some time, but it is important and best not neglected.

Determine what kind of information feed-back occurs. Do others listen? Do people pay attention? Do you get a reaction, good or bad? Find out. Communication--at all levels--is essential. Ask questions. Find out what is going on.

Identify Resources

As a volunteer, you have donated that most precious of commodities--time. But everything else costs money. Remember the words of H. L. Mencken: "There is no such thing as a free lunch." Establish what your budget is for everything you do or wish to do. Something called "overhead" may take care of mundane office needs--light, air-conditioning or supplies, like paper clips. But other items--reproduction, telephone, FAX machines, postage--may be charged to your budget. Identify your budget. Determine what, for example, a press release costs. If management does not know this basic fact of life, you should. How cost-effective is this activity? Find out if you do not know; inform management if they do not know. There may be other and better outlets to apply your budgeted funds. This information is an integral part of your planning role.

In a non-profit organization you may be the sole occupant of a one-person public relations function. Get some help. Two

avenues are open for exploration. First, you might investigate local colleges and universities for an intern. Today many universities are delighted to provide bright, well-trained undergraduates, willing and eager to learn on-the-job skills for college credits. Most schools have rules and guidelines that must be met, so check thoroughly before you get into this. The first thing you must do is to prepare a clear job description of what is needed. If you wish someone who can write well (usually a major requirement), say so; if your needs call for other talents, say, art or layout skills, chances are you may likely find a match with a talented student with similar aims. Work with the college intern coordinator and after several student interviews you are apt to have your choice of willing assistants. The experience will bring mutual benefits. Try it as a source of assistance.

Another means to some useful support may be through cooperation with a professional public relations firm. Many

firms, of all sizes, welcome some form of pro bono work, particularly with non-profit organizations, like the Red Cross. Work of this nature is simply good public relations for a public relations organization and, frankly, work of this nature is not likely to erode their market or be viewed as unfair by other firms. This approach should be used sparingly; perhaps for a special event or some limited aspects of a specific campaign. Be reasonable in your requests and let them know that you and your organization appreciate their assistance. Explore the possibilities in your local community; you may be delighted with the results.

The ultimate responsibility is yours, however; it is through your efforts that failure or success will be measured. Like Christopher Columbus, you should know where you are going but not at all certain of what will be encountered along the way.

Define Your Objectives

Every public relations operation

encompasses a number of tasks; these will vary according to client needs. In your work environment, define and identify those that apply to your specific situation. Next, make a priority listing of those tasks. For example, if your office desires at least one press release each week, that activity must be entered and scheduled. (Bear in mind, however, that the basic definition of every news release is that it contains "news" as that commodity is defined by the media targeted.) Also, establish measurable goals to evaluate your progress; press releases serve no good unless they are printed, or aired by the electronic media in a timely manner. See if the releases are used; if not, find out why. Identify your objectives; attain the goals established; and define an evaluation for success.

Compile an ongoing list of problems and issues; items and areas. Determine which are important and rank these. Identify possible solutions or remedies, if possible, and establish the objectives you wish to

reach. Any number of devices will present themselves as possible solutions; select a goal; choose one approach and try it for a time as you evaluate performance. This approach will help you to do your job and will prove useful when you present your work to your boss for a progress report. If you define the objectives, and evaluate the success or failure rate, you can plot projected progress with a great deal of accuracy and confidence. Plan with care; good performance will follow.

Public relations today is first and foremost a management function that oversees and, at times, sets policies and programs. That role over-arches all day-to-day operations and tasks. Management, very simply defined, means being in control at all times. In every organization, sometime or somehow, crises occur. Plan for that crisis. Every kind of crisis can be anticipated. With luck, not many will occur. But expect the unexpected. Plans and preparation will enable you to cope with a crisis. Be ready when, and if, a crisis

does occur. If your office does not have a crisis plan, prepare one. In some instances, a crisis may be internal--in your own office or within the organization. What happens if the building burns down and your offices are destroyed? How are essential elements, like the media list, protected? Crises can be anticipated; planning for the unexpected is one means toward prudent protection of the public relations function. It is one measurement of a well-run operation. Volunteers may be unpaid; but they can--and should--be professional in their performance. Successful management of crisis communications is an essential criterion for all public relations operations.

Avenues of Communication

Public relations is two-way communication at all levels. And the internal communication within your own organization is often every bit as important as the communication avenues to the various outside publics. Internally, make certain

that you know what is happening within your office; and keep your staff and colleagues fully informed as well. Moreover, you have an obligation to keep your superiors informed of what you are doing and saying. If you have problems, let the right people know--especially if you have solutions. Do not attempt to muddle through or, worse, to fake it; you are inviting disaster if you do. Write memos, attend meetings and participate in a positive manner. The mark of a true professional is to be informed.

If one word is essential to the success of any public relations person, however, that word is "credibility." You must have credibility with your colleagues, but especially with the news media. That single quality is essential; it spells the difference between success and failure. Credibility must be earned; it must be jealously guarded; it cannot be compromised. If you do not know the correct answer when asked by the media, say so. If you can find out, do so in an appropriate manner. The three most difficult words for anyone

to say are, "I don't know." The important thing is to find out. It is the best way to earn credibility; it's the only way to keep it.

Know who the media people are. Every individual on your media list should be someone you know. This will take time, to be sure. But the effort reaps infinite rewards. Know what their positions are; what their individual deadlines are; what their specific news interests are. Talk to them when you can; when it is convenient for them. If they have questions, respond openly and truthfully. Do not lie to the media. Ever. These people are the gate-keepers to your interested publics. They are essential to your success in reaching these publics.

But you can also get to know the key people related to those publics you seek to inform and influence. Open the lines of your personal communication and work diligently to keep them open. Be available. Return telephone calls promptly. Write letters; answer your mail in a timely manner.

Public interest is your stock-in-trade, but you have a number of specific publics in particular. This focus does not, by any means, exclude others. But give close and continuing attention to your targeted publics with special emphasis at all times. Neglect this at your peril.

Personal Points

You are aware of the specific needs to undertake the challenging role of public relations. The essentials are clear; there are no arcane mysteries; you have the guidelines needed. You must bring personal enthusiasm and energy to work that is often unremitting and seldom glamorous. As a volunteer, you may feel overworked and unrewarded (qualities endured by virtually every public relations practitioner) but your contributions are, nonetheless, invaluable and essential to every group that welcomes your contribution. This help and support is vital to the success of every organization that needs active volunteer participation.

Volunteers constitute a significant measure of support to non-profit groups that work for the public good. Volunteers are treasures to be recognized and sustained for the vast amounts of time and work they contribute so willingly every day, every week, every month, every year. Like all working professionals, that performance is measured every hour of every working day and volunteers demonstrate the highest standards of capability.

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